

First Freedom Project

Boosts Effort to Protect Religious Liberty

By DAVID ANTHONY DENNY

The U.S. Department of Justice has launched a program to educate the public about laws protecting religious freedom and to build relationships with religious, civil rights and community leaders to ensure religious liberty concerns are brought to the department's attention.

A key person in this effort, called the First Freedom Project, is Eric Treene, the special counsel for religious discrimination in the department's Civil Rights Division.

Treene says that even though his division is charged with protecting the right of individuals to be free from discrimination and hate crimes on the basis of race, sex, religion or national origin, "there had not been any concerted, focused effort to look for and bring religious discrimination cases" to light.

According to statistics from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Treene says, religious discrimination complaints increased by 69 percent from the early 1990s to 2005, but race and sex discrimination cases stayed level or even went down during the same time period.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, only exacerbated the problem, according to Treene. "After 9/11 we saw an increase in hate crimes against Muslims and people perceived to be Muslim, as well as a doubling of complaints of discrimination against Muslims in employment," he says.

Treene says U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales' meetings with Muslim Americans provided the impetus for the First Freedom Project. The groups told Gonzales in January that they were pleased with the agency's record in this area, "but they wanted us to publicize it more generally"—for the education of the person on the street—to emphasize the importance and universal nature of religious liberty and the importance of protecting the rights of all persons, including Muslim Americans.

"And that's what this initiative is all about," Treene says. "It's not about protecting any individual's faith; it's not just about protecting Muslims. It's about protecting religious liberty as a fundamental human right."

Gonzales announced the First Freedom Project in a speech to the Southern Baptist Convention on February 20. In that speech Gonzales prefaced the project's announcement by saying, "One of our most cherished freedoms—one we've sacrificed greatly to defend—is our religious liberty. Nothing defines us more as a nation—and differentiates us more from the extremists who are our enemies—than our respect for

U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales



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religious freedom."

Gonzales continued, "Our great country was founded on these principles, and many of us today believe it continues to thrive because of, not despite, them."

The attorney general said the First

ings for nonreligious purposes, Gonzales said, Hearn was suspended twice for wearing her headscarf.

"That's a difficult position for a young student to be in, facing down her school principal and administration," said Gonzales. "I

EXPLAINER

Americans call freedom of religion one of their "first freedoms" because it is protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution, which states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." During the debates on the adoption of the U.S. Constitution, its opponents repeatedly charged that the document as drafted would open the way to tyranny by the central government. They demanded a "bill of rights" that would spell out the immunities of individual citizens. Several state conventions in their formal ratification of the Constitution asked for such amendments; others ratified the Constitution with the understanding that the amendments would be offered. In 1789, the first 10 Constitutional amendments, known as the Bill of Rights, were ratified by three-fourths of the state legislatures and became part of the fundamental law of the land.

Freedom Project will create a Religious Freedom Task Force to review policies and cases. A public education program will include regional training seminars, a Web site and literature on how to file a religious discrimination complaint.

Gonzales told the story of Nashala Hearn, a Muslim sixth-grader in Muskogee, Oklahoma, whose school told her that she could not wear a headscarf required by her faith. Though other students were permitted to wear head cover-

don't know how I would have reacted when I was in sixth grade. But Nashala stood up for herself, and she had the Department of Justice to back her up.

"If you know of any Nashalas out there," he said, "who find themselves facing down religious intolerance, and who think they're all alone in their fight...you tell them to come talk to me."

David Anthony Denny is a USINFO staff writer.



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